

From A to Zen – Exploring the Wisdom of China – Part 4 of 7

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The Legacy of Confucius

There is this joke about Koreans being lousy football players. The reason is that if there are two people the ball can be passed to, one younger one in a good position and one older one in worse position, the player with the ball will always pass the ball to the older player, regardless of his position. This deference to elders is so heavily ingrained in the players that when manager Guus Hiddink took over as coach of the national team in 2000, reportedly this was the hardest thing for him to change. Whether you take this as a joke or not, I suspect that it is as with myself: Whenever I'm joking I'm always also a bit serious, and when I'm serious, I'm also always slightly joking. In other words, there is something to it.

Now I don't know if Chinese football players face the same dilemma as their Korean counterparts, but one thing they have in common is the importance of the respect towards elders which is at the heart of this yarn. This is widespread throughout East Asia and quite unlike the culture in Western countries. Furthermore, these two countries and in fact also Taiwan, Japan, and Vietnam have something else in common. They have been deeply influenced by the thought and life of one man who lived around 2500 years ago in China:

This man is Confucius (孔夫子, Kǒng Fūzǐ or often just *Kong Zi*).

Confucius is without doubt one of the best known historical figures in China; not only that, he is well-known outside of China, too. In modern times this might be because of the over 328 Confucius institutes that have been established in over 82 countries and regions since 2004. One of the most recent additions will shortly open in Freiburg, the ninth of its kind in Germany. The Confucius Institute is similar in function to the German Goethe Institute, the Institute Francais, and the British Council: Its aim is to promote Chinese language and culture and to assist in Chinese teaching matters.

However, it is less known that the teachings of Confucius already found their way to Europe over three centuries ago, when Jesuit scholars translated *The Life and Works of Confucius* into Latin in the 1680's. In this way his teachings may well have contributed to some of the philosophical strands that emerged during the European Enlightenment. Some Eastern and Western scholars even speak of a Chinese version of Humanism, although it might be more appropriate to speak of a Western form Confucianism. That's because Confucius did not have much to say about god(s), spirit(s), the soul or an afterlife. He centred his approach on the human and the understanding of human nature. When asked about this by one of his disciples he reportedly replied:

Men are close to one another by nature; they diverge as the result of repeated practice.

Confucius also believed that rather than a deity or a set of principles, or moral laws, the example of human excellence served as the ultimate model for people and society. This is where the idea of a Junzi (君子) comes from, that is: the best possible version of your self, perhaps comparable to the English concept of a gentleman. To cultivate this best version of oneself is one of the pillars of his teachings.

This reminds me of Swami Parthasarathy, author, lecturer and founder of the Vedanta Academy in India. When once asked by an interviewer whether he also practiced what he preached, he corrected the man saying: *Sir, you misunderstand. I don't practice what I preach, I preach because I practice.* What this means is that you change your practice or your behaviour and in return, your behaviour changes you.

This relationship between philosophy and practice, in other words, the union of the mind and the body, through proper ideas and proper conduct, is something which distinguishes Eastern from Western Philosophy in many respects. In its place, in the West, we find an almost schizophrenic separation of mind and matter, abstract philosophy on the one hand and materialistic sciences on the other.

Because of this and many other differences, it has always been difficult, from a Western perspective to make sense of Confucianism. Is it religion or philosophy, a moral and ethical framework or a political science?

The best answer is probably: All of it and none of it.

In the West, and to some extent the Abrahamic World, people are accustomed to quite clear distinctions. You are either religious or secular, Christian or Muslim, Protestant or Catholic. You are either on the right side of the political spectrum or on the left side. You are either rational or you are superstitious. But you can't be all of it. You can't pray to Mohammad in the morning, the Holy Virgin Mary at noon, do witchcraft and magic spells in the evening and then go out for a beer with your buddy Richard Dawkins (evolutionary biologist and outspoken atheist).

Well, here it's all a bit different. While in the West we sometimes seem hopelessly rigid, being at the mercy of the mutually exclusive labels and categories we have invented over time, China's cultural history displays amazing syncretism, in other words: the coming together and co-existence of disparate religions, philosophies, and ways of life, nowhere better immortalised than in the Ying and Yang, symbolising the interdependence of opposites. It's a bit like Hegel's famous dialectic: you have a thesis and an antithesis and, far from being incompatible, together they form something new, the synthesis.

But imagine for example the synthesis of Protestantism and Catholicism. The closest we can come to that is obviously in ecumenism, but this is really a reaction to the very historical trajectory of the Occident – an endless splitting up of movements and traditions which then stand apart from each other and too often fight one another.

By contrast, as Steve Durrant, Professor of Chinese Literature at the University of Oregon explains, traditions in China tend to complement each other and arrange themselves. Traditionally, if you lived in China, it would not be unusual to take part in a state ceremony, conducted according to strict Confucian principles. For your wellbeing you might practice Taoist meditation practices and breathing methods. In illness you would consult Taoist sages for natural remedies and other healing advice. In moments of doubt and loss of direction you would seek Buddhist monks for guidance and when death nears, receive spiritual comfort. And alongside this you would regularly pay respect to your ancestors and other deities, such as Guan Yin, and engage in other traditions and superstitions through rites and ceremonies.

Confucius is only a part in this rich cultural tradition, but an integral one. Most scholars agree that the philosophical and religious tradition in China underwent fewer radical changes and thus saw more continuity compared to the West. While there, enlightenment thinkers such as Descartes wanted to purge their world of the past traditions and begin anew, few Chinese philosophers ever tried to abandon their heritage.

This was also an essential idea of Confucius. He saw himself as a transmitter, not an innovator. He believed that to understand the present you have to know history, that by knowing and warming up the old you can be a good teacher.

For over two thousand years this seems to have been the fundamental philosophy in this part of the world. And coming back to the present we can still find evidence of it.

Confucius from the heart

Following in the footsteps of the greatest of all Chinese teachers, Professor of Media Studies at Beijing Normal University with a degree in Philosophy and Literature, Yu Dan is famous in China for a series of lectures on Confucius broadcast on CCTV in 2006. She does what Confucius himself would have done: warm up the old and make it accessible to a new generation.

The lectures were edited into a book titled *Yu Dan's Notes on the Analects* which sold 10 000 copies on the first day of release. By the end of 2007 an estimated 10 million had been sold, making it a best-seller. And far from being only interesting for Chinese readers, the book was published in English in May 2009.

With her understanding of Confucius, Yu Dan offers an ancient Window for a modern world. According to her, today it is possible to interpret his ideas from

a different angle, allowing to find the ideas that suit our own era, a time of globalisation and fast change. One doesn't need to be an academic to enjoy Confucius from the heart, because Yu Dan had ordinary people in mind when she wrote. She said she wanted to produce an easy-to-understand way for Confucius.

What we have here then is a contemporary scholar re-articulating and repackaging the thoughts of an ancient scholar, who himself rephrased and re-presented the teachings of even older scholars – a very long train of thought; a thread that leads back to truly ancient times.

What then is the legacy of Confucius?

That he is alive and popular more than two millennia after his death?

That he continues to serve as a revered role model, being remembered and looked up to by millions of people around the world without ever having been rich and powerful, without having been a ruler and a conqueror, without having invented any material technology and without having won battles and wars?

Or that he is the ultimate teacher, setting an example for us all and representing Chinese Culture through the 1000 Confucius Institutes China plans to establish by the year 2020?

Perhaps it doesn't matter. As Yu Dan recounts: "Our biggest difficulty is that of choice. Live plainly and simply: do what is in front of you as well as you can; there is no need to worry about most things, so don't worry about them"

Did you know?

- According to tradition, Confucius was born in 551 BC in the Spring and Autumn period in or near the city of Qufu (曲阜), in the state of Lu (魯), now part of Shandong province.
- There are about 2 million known and registered descendants of Confucius, and about 3 million in all.
- Confucius was also a musician and drew many parallels between the harmony in music achieved by the interplay of the musicians and the harmony in culture that can be brought about by society.
- One of Confucius' most famous teachings was the Golden Rule: *What one does not wish for oneself, one ought not to do to anyone else; what one recognises as desirable for oneself, one ought to be willing to grant to others.*
- During the Cultural Revolution, Confucianism was frequently attacked by leading figures.

- Under Emperor Wudi (汉武帝) (ruling from 141 to 87 BC), during the Han Dynasty, works of Confucius were made the official imperial philosophy and required reading for civil service examinations. This was continued almost uninterrupted until the end of the 19th century.
- The famous Confucian Analects were compiled posthumously over a period of 30 to 50 years by his followers.
- The scholar Zhu Xi (朱熹) (1130-1200 CE) is credited with having [established](#) *Neo-Confucianism* through adding ideas from Buddhism and Taoism to traditional Confucianism.
- People honour Confucius on his birthday, every 28th of September.
- In Wafangdian, a small city governed by Dalian, there is a Confucius Study Association.